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ARTICLE

UNLEASHING THE WILL TO POWER: NEO-JACOBIN EXCEPTIONALISM AS A JUSTIFICATION FOR AMERICAN GLOBAL SUPREMACY

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When seeking the presidency in 2000 George W. Bush repeatedly expressed reservations about an interventionist foreign policy and nation building. He called for a more “humble” approach to foreign affairs. This view of America’s role in the world was so different from the one that he enunciated immediately after 9/11 that one has to wonder whether he had adopted it out of political expediency, thinking it conducive to victory in the election. Had it been a deeply held belief, he would hardly have changed it so quickly and so comprehensively. It is likely that even before 9/11 Bush was strongly drawn to the highly ambitious view of America’s international role for which he would soon become the leading spokesman. It was hardly a coincidence that so many of his foreign policy and national security advisors were attracted to the notion of American global supremacy.

An ideology of American empire had in the last several decades become increasingly common in the American foreign policy and national security establishment inside and outside of government.² The ideology does not envision empire in the old-fashioned sense of permanent occupation of large territories, which would be an anachronism at a time when the United States can work its will on recalcitrant powers by other means. What the proponents of the ideology aspire to is armed American global supremacy. Military intervention and a protracted military presence may at times be necessary in various parts of the world, but other kinds of pressure,

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2. See Claes G. Ryn, *America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire* (Transaction Publishers 2003), which explores in depth the emergence, ideas, leading figures, influence, and historical context of the ideology of American empire. On the connection between this ideology and the militarization of U.S. foreign policy, see Andrew Bacevitch, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (Oxford U. Press 2005).

including the threat of the use of force, will often be sufficient to ensure obedience to the United States.

As presidential advisors and speechwriters, proponents of the ideology were able after 9/11 to help shape George W. Bush's reaction to the attacks. The United States might have concentrated on identifying the actual perpetrators of the atrocity and striking back at them, but 9/11 became instead the occasion for launching an enormously ambitious new foreign policy that was virtually the opposite of what the American people had been led to expect during the 2000 election campaign. According to the Bush doctrine, which was formulated in short order, America would not only pursue a worldwide campaign against terrorism and strike preemptively against potential threats, it would also promote freedom and better governance in the world; it would foster and take charge of what the president would call "the global democratic revolution." Many advocates of the ideology of American empire had long promoted war against Iraq. The selling and implementation of the new policy was greatly facilitated by the fact that numerous proponents of the ideology were already well-placed in government, major newspapers and other media, intellectual magazines, think tanks, and in both parties on Capitol Hill—a subject that will be discussed later at some length.³

Though the ideology of American empire invokes the principles of the so-called "American Founding" and is often labeled "neoconservative," it can be shown to represent a sharp break with the old American political tradition. The latter emphasizes human moral and other imperfection and the need for placing limits on power. Instead of aligning itself with that constitutionalist ethos and the view of human nature and society of which it is an expression, the ideology sanctions an unleashing of power that it also declares to be virtuous. It will be argued here that the ideology, though it serves more than one purpose, justifies a vast expansion of American might and the removal of obstacles to the triumph of the putative American cause. The ideology makes a case for unchallenged American global supremacy. Contrary to the traditional American view that the will to power must be tamed, the ideology is a potent stimulant for that same will. Whether the ideology should be regarded primarily as an intellectual force that inspires and guides political action or as an attempt to validate power already desired for hidden purposes will not here be discussed in any depth.

Neo-Jacobin Exceptionalism

The ideology of American empire makes far-reaching claims for the United States. America, it declares, is unique among nations in that it is

3. Among the ideology's more visible advocates are William Bennett, Donald Kagan, Charles Krauthammer, William Kristol, Michael Novak, Richard Perle, Norman Podhoretz, and Paul Wolfowitz.

based on universal principles and in that it is called to spread those principles to the rest of the world. The late Allan Bloom (1930–1992), a leading disciple of the German-American political theorist Leo Strauss (1899–1973), exemplified the emerging intellectual pattern in a best-selling book published in 1988, *The Closing of the American Mind*. He explained that the essence of America is not its historically evolved, nationally distinctive traditions but the universally valid principles on which it was founded. America is first and foremost an idea, a proposition. “The American project,” Bloom asserted, is for all peoples. To politically serious Americans, he argued, the “principles of freedom and equality and the rights based on them are rational and everywhere applicable.”⁴ Because this America stands above historically generated prejudices and represents universal right, it has a special role to play in the world. Variations on this theme form the moral core of the ideology under discussion.

That the United States is special and has a global mission has been a staple of the speeches of President George W. Bush. America represents the aspirations of all humanity. It sees further than other countries. In the State of the Union address in 2005 Bush told his fellow Americans that “we live in the country where the biggest dreams are born.”⁵ He had long asserted that America’s values are for all people. “There is a value system that cannot be compromised, and that is the values we praise. And if the values are good enough for our people, they ought to be good enough for others.”⁶

In a large number of speeches and statements since 9/11 President Bush has argued for armed world hegemony as necessary for realizing the historic mission of the United States. In the second inaugural address, his language about America as the home of freedom and as the ally of all of those in the world who desire freedom gave rhetorically effusive expression to a central theme of the ideology of empire. He went so far as to say that advancing the values of freedom and democracy is “the mission that created our nation.”⁷ The symbolism of his address blended in suggestive ways with the symbolism of the rest of the inauguration, much of it military, to signal the moral commitment, power, and invincibility of the United States. The massive security for the event, which involved some 30,000 secret service, police, and military, was by itself a statement of America’s indomitability. What could be more foolish than to challenge American leadership?

4. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* 153 (Simon & Schuster 1987).

5. George W. Bush, Speech, *State of the Union Address* (D.C., Feb. 2, 2005) (available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050202-11.html>).

6. Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* 131 (Simon & Schuster 2002); see also George F. Will, . . . *Or Maybe Not at All*, Wash. Post B07 (Aug. 17, 2003) (available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A1214-2003Aug15>).

7. George W. Bush, Speech, *Second Inaugural Address* (D.C., Jan. 20, 2005) (available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/01/20050120-1.html>); see also George W. Bush, Press Conference, *Press Conference of the President* (D.C., Jan. 26, 2006) (available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/01/20060126.html>).

Here was installed an American emperor, one far more powerful and ambitious than any Roman counterpart. The event seemed designed to stimulate nationalism, a will to power in the American people. At a news conference a few days after the inauguration, the president said that all peoples want to be free and added, "I look forward to leading the world in that direction." He appeared to invite his fellow Americans to enjoy viscerally the great power available to their commander in chief.⁸

The notion that America is different from and superior to other nations has a long history. Many of the early American colonists believed that God meant for America to be a haven for His people and an example to others. In a sermon in 1630, John Winthrop famously said, in an allusion to St. Matthew, that America should be like a "city on a hill."⁹ This notion undoubtedly contained an element of spiritual smugness, but it did not deny that Americans were members of the same fallen human race as other peoples. Far from implying that Americans should dominate other nations, this early form of American exceptionalism assumed the desirability of isolation from the rest of the world, not least sinful Europe with its religious oppression.

Over time, American exceptionalism would go through various permutations. In the early twentieth century it evolved, partly under the influence of a form of progressive Protestant Christianity, into a presumption that America was morally better than other nations and was called to improve the world.¹⁰ In important respects today's ideology of American empire was foreshadowed by President Woodrow Wilson, of whose rhetoric echoes are often heard in the speeches of George W. Bush. According to Wilson, America did not act out of selfish national interest as other nations but represented the cause of all humanity. Of America's entry into the First World War he said that "we will fight for the things we have always carried in our hearts—for democracy." America would fight for "a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world at last free." America was "privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness."¹¹ Wilson may have thought of himself as an anti-imperialist, but his self-applauding moralism more than implied a need for American global leadership.

The proponents of the new ideology of empire have thus been able to draw upon various antecedents, but they have formulated a far more ambi-

8. *Id.*

9. John Winthrop, Sermon, *A Model of Christian Charity*, (The Arbella, 1630), in *Lend Me Your Ears: Great Speeches in History* 860 (William Safire ed., W. W. Norton & Co. 2004). The quoted words are from Matthew 5:14.

10. For a penetrating study of the role of progressive Christianity in fostering a messianic streak in American foreign policy before and during the First World War, see Richard M. Gamble, *The War for Righteousness* (ISI Books 2003).

11. Thomas Fleming, *The Illusion of Victory* 20 (Basic Books 2003).

tious goal for the United States than had previously been contemplated and have provided a more comprehensive and ideologically systematic justification for it. The advocates of American empire have transformed the original American exceptionalism into an expansive, ideologically intense nationalism, whose extolling of American virtue is not moderated by a Christian sense of human fallibility and sinfulness.

Though the advocates of the ideology of empire usually put a heavy emphasis on foreign affairs, their views on this subject form part of a more general view of man, society, and the world. As will be discussed later, the ideology assumes a particular understanding of the "American Founding." A defining feature of the ideology is the idea that political and cultural arrangements rooted in history are inherently flawed or perverse and that only rational principles above and beyond history are worthy of respect. Old societies should have a fresh start. The greatness of America is that its founding provided that fresh start. As the sole superpower in the world, America should now foster it in other nations.

That America represents the good of all humanity is by itself an argument for boosting and accepting American power, but the ideology also assumes that the ideal for which America fights contrasts sharply with what history has produced in most countries. Because of the distance between what exists and what the United States wants for mankind, America must mobilize and assert immense power. This power should be welcomed by all decent persons. As the goal is noble, so is the power needed to achieve it noble. Power exercised for the sake of a better world can be exempted from ordinary restraint. The ideology of empire seeks to allay the old American fear of concentration of power. It subverts the emphasis on constitutional and other checks on power. Because challenging the Constitution outright would be politically risky, the advocates of American world supremacy have tried instead to give Americans a new self-understanding. They have redefined the principles of the so-called American Founding and sought to transfer the loyalties of Americans to an image of America and the Constitution that is more serviceable to an expansive use of power.

President Bush often leaves the impression that religious faith inspires his policies. In the State of the Union speech of 2005 he claimed to have discerned "the road of Providence." "We know where it leads," he said. "It leads to freedom."¹² As he tries to spread freedom in the world, he is thus enacting the will of God. Because of Bush's use of religious-sounding language, many commentators, especially in Europe, have concluded that U.S. foreign policy and government in general are now dominated by Christian considerations. This view is at once simplistic and mistaken. Though the President and others may think that in justifying his foreign policy he is expressing Christian sensibilities, and though he may be trying to get Chris-

12. Bush, *supra* n. 5.

tian support for his policies, the ideology of American empire has chiefly non-Christian origins and is alien to the mainstream of historical Christianity.

From the beginning, Christianity made a distinction between the things of God and the things of Caesar.¹³ To assume identity between the worldly objectives of politicians and the religious goals of the Church is inappropriate and potentially dangerous. This does not mean that Christianity has seen no role for religion in politics, but that no particular political leader, movement, or country should presume to represent God's purpose in the world. The Christian tradition insists that mankind is not only flawed but fallen. Even more than other parts of life, politics and government tend to become infected by questionable, sometimes diabolical motives. Often an egotistical desire for power over others presents itself to the person and to those over whom he wants to rule as a selfless concern for their well-being. According to the mainstream of Christianity, statesmen should, like others, try to make room for the spirit of God by always questioning their motives and trying to rid themselves of tainted ones, but not even a pure motive equips a human being to discern God's political will for the world, for human reason and knowledge are, at best, imperfect. Christianity recognizes no single political model as appropriate to all circumstances. No politician or thinker can speak for God. Great certitude and an unwillingness to consider opposing views ignore the infinite complexity of human existence and the limits of human understanding. To think of oneself as virtuous and of one's political opponents as evil is pleasing to one's will to power, but such vanity contradicts the traditional Western view that rarely, if ever, is all good found on one side and all evil on the other.¹⁴

Claiming to know the "way of Providence," which implies that God is endorsing his foreign policy, President Bush declares opposition to his will to be morally perverse and boosts his followers' sense of self-importance. He may here be exhibiting just the type of arrogance that the older Western tradition, the classical as well as the Christian, specifically condemned. The Greeks warned of the great danger of hubris.¹⁵ For the Christians, the cardinal sin is pride.

Quite apart from whether particular politicians can be said to represent Christianity, it is simplistic to believe, as is particularly common in Europe, that the Bush presidency and Republican control of Congress signify Chris-

13. For an explication and discussion of this distinction, see Claes Ryn, *The Things of Caesar: Toward the Delimitation of Politics*, in *Essays on Christianity and Political Philosophy* 107 (George W. Carey & James V. Schall, S.J. eds., U. Press of Am. 1984).

14. On the moral complexity of politics and how constitutionalism responds to this predicament, see Ryn, *supra* n. 2, especially chs. 9–10. See also Claes G. Ryn, *Democracy and the Ethical Life* ch. 8 (2d ed. expanded, The Catholic U. of Am. 1990).

15. The Greek sense of the blindness and littleness of man and the need for humility before the gods permeates the work of Sophocles. See e.g. Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, in *Sophocles: The Oedipus Cycle* 1 (Dudley Fitts & Robert Fitzgerald trans., Harvest Book / Harcourt Inc. 2002).

tian control of the American government. Not only does the American supremacist foreign policy run counter to old Christian attitudes, but any traditionally Christian influences on American national politics are also powerfully counteracted by what may loosely be called the institutions of American national culture, including the major television networks and cable channels, the major newspapers, Hollywood and the entertainment industry, the art world, the leading universities, and the publishing industry. In these institutions, which have long exerted great influence over the American mind and imagination, Christianity is generally viewed with hostility or is merely tolerated in its more “progressive” forms.

Even if the new ideology of American global supremacy is sometimes presented in vaguely Christian-sounding language, its moral-political import cannot be adequately understood without recognizing its distinctly non-Christian origins. This writer has argued at length elsewhere that there are striking similarities between the proponents of the ideology and the Jacobins who inspired and led the French Revolution. There are good reasons to call the advocates of American global supremacy “the new Jacobins.”¹⁶ Like them, the French Jacobins regarded themselves as champions of universal principles. They proclaimed “*liberté, égalité, et fraternité*.” Those today who are promoting American empire call for a virtuous global campaign for “freedom” and “democracy” and an “end to evil.” The old Jacobins, too, advocated liberation and popular rule and saw themselves as fighting evil in the world. They even called themselves “*les vertueux*,” the virtuous. Like the new Jacobins, they demanded a society and world radically different from the one they had inherited.

The French Jacobins were followers of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). Rousseau had argued, in *The Social Contract* (1762), that “man was born free, but he is everywhere in chains.”¹⁷ Man is naturally good, Rousseau asserted, but historically existing societies had warped and imprisoned him. For men to be liberated, inherited societies and beliefs had to be destroyed. Maximilien Robespierre (1758–1794), the Jacobin ideologue and orator who became the leader of France, was enamored of Rousseau and believed that he was implementing his ideas. The Jacobins dealt harshly with “evil,” guillotining leading representatives of the old order and employing a general ruthlessness that culminated in the Reign of Terror.¹⁸ Considering the vileness of existing society, there was to the Jacobins nothing paradoxical about liberating men by force. In 2002, President Bush in-

16. See Ryn, *supra* n. 2. The argument is summarized, with special emphasis on issues of foreign policy, in Claes G. Ryn, *The Ideology of American Empire*, 47 *Orbis* 383 (2003).

17. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract*, in *The Basic Political Writings* 141 (Donald A. Cress ed. & trans., Hackett 1987).

18. For a detailed account of the origins, ideas, main figures, and stages of the French Revolution, see Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (Alfred A. Knopf 1989).

formed the U.S. Congress that the “Department of Defense . . . has become the most powerful force for freedom the world has ever seen.”¹⁹ One here recalls Rousseau’s idea that those who resist political right will have to be “forced to be free.”²⁰ An obvious difference between the French and the new Jacobins is that the latter have chosen not France but America as the Liberator of mankind. What is the same is the attempt to provide moral *carte blanche* for the political objectives of a particular country.

On his European tour in the winter of 2005, President Bush solicited the support of Europe for America’s worldwide campaign for freedom and democracy, saying to the Europeans that “our ideals and our interests lead in the same direction.”²¹ What that direction was had been tellingly indicated just a few days earlier by the President’s then-newly-appointed secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice. Speaking in Paris, she made the connection between Jacobin ideas and Bush’s foreign-policy thinking clearer than it had ever been. She said that “the founders of both the French and American republics were inspired by the very same values and by each other.”²² In other words, the American and French republics had origins in the same revolutionary spirit. Though a flagrant misrepresentation of history, this statement amply confirmed the Jacobin impetus behind the administration’s foreign policy. Already as an advisor to George W. Bush in the 2000 presidential campaign, Rice had written in *Foreign Affairs* that “American values are universal” and that it is in the American national interest for those values to triumph everywhere in the world.²³

Rice’s conflation of the values of the French and American Revolutions made explicit the connection that had long been discernible in the President’s statements of foreign-policy principle between his notion of freedom and democracy for the world and an ahistorical, Jacobin idea of universal rights. His second inaugural address offered a particularly telling confirmation of his affinity for the Jacobin faith. To describe the desire for freedom that he champions, the President used a well-known phrase: “fire in the minds of men.” The phrase is taken from Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Possessed*, where it stands for a spirit of upheaval and rebelliousness. In 1980, James Billington, who would later become the Librarian of the U.S. Congress, used the same phrase as the title for a book, *Fire in the Minds of*

19. George W. Bush, Speech, *Message to the Congress of the United States* (D.C., June 18, 2002) (available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020618-5.html>).

20. Rousseau, *supra* n. 17, at 150.

21. George W. Bush, Speech, *President Discusses American and European Alliance in Belgium* (Brussels, Belgium, Feb. 21, 2005) (available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050221.html>).

22. Condoleezza Rice, Speech, *Remarks at the Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Paris - Sciences Po* (Paris, France, Feb. 2005) (available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/41973.htm>).

23. Condoleezza Rice, *Campaign 2000: Promoting the National Interest*, 79 *Foreign Affairs* 45 (2000).

Men, that became famous. The book deals with the revolutionary faith that, having inspired the French Revolution, would eventually unsettle the entire Western world and spawn the communist revolution of 1917. In his second inaugural address, President Bush used this phrase, not, as might have been expected of a reputed conservative, to reject what it invokes, but to define the spirit of freedom to which he believes America is committed. He is strongly attracted, rhetorically at minimum, to a revolutionary faith that has created some of history's most ruthless regimes.

Though the President's speeches and statements often have a distinctly Jacobin flavor, the precise extent to which he understands the connotations and implications of his own words is of course open to question; he is neither an intellectual nor a historian. Many of the President's speechwriters and advisors can be assumed to be more fully alert to the meaning and implications of the ideology for which he has become the most prominent spokesman.

A Powerful Neo-Jacobin Network

The ideology of American world supremacy was already fully formed and had numerous well-placed representatives by the time the Soviet Union started to crumble. The neo-Jacobins then argued that America should use its might as the sole remaining superpower to spread American principles, as they defined them.²⁴ They were able to build a political alliance for American global supremacy by taking advantage of hawkish impulses left over from the Cold War and of a nationalistic fondness for employing American power. Lingering Wilsonian impulses helped legitimate and boost the influence of their ideology. They adopted a pronouncedly moralistic rhetoric, asserting that good stands against evil in the world. They demanded "moral clarity" in foreign policy. Communism had collapsed, but now they were substituting for it another universalist ideology.

As the arguments originally given for going to war against Iraq lost more and more of their credibility among the general public, President Bush began to play up the idea that the war was "the first step" in the effort to create a more democratic world. When, in early May of 2003, he announced the end of major hostilities in Iraq, Bush praised and thanked American soldiers for fighting for freedom and for making possible "a watershed event in the global democratic revolution."²⁵ None of his speeches and statements since that announcement have indicated that the lack of realism in planning for the war or the tens of thousands of dead and maimed or the destruction and chaos in Iraq have led him to revise his global objectives. In

24. On the origins and spread of neo-Jacobin ideology, see Ryn, *supra* n. 2, at ch. 13.

25. George W. Bush, Speech, *President Discusses War on Terror at Fort Hood* (Fort Hood, Tex., Apr. 12, 2005) (available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/04/20050412.html>).

May of 2005, he announced plans to create a corps of U.S. federal workers who could be sent quickly to help new democracies in crisis. Only growing public disgruntlement with the war in Iraq and competing claims on the resources available to the American government put a damper on the desire of the neo-Jacobins to proceed with their international agenda.

The meaning and influence of the new Jacobinism is only very imperfectly understood by American intellectuals, politicians, and journalists who are not themselves a part of the neo-Jacobin network, to say nothing of the American general public. Still, rarely has an ideology been so strongly entrenched in a country's opinion-molding establishment. Especially on foreign-policy issues, the new Jacobinism is well represented in all of America's major media outlets. In the daily press, this is particularly true of the *Wall Street Journal*, but the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* also give it much space. It receives more than a hearing in such weekly magazines as *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. Among the opinion magazines, the *Weekly Standard* is most predictably neo-Jacobin. This same foreign-policy emphasis also marks formerly more conservative magazines like the *National Review*. In the commentariat, neo-Jacobin thinking has seized the initiative from a more diffuse and less vigorous liberalism. It is virtually omnipresent in think tanks that give prominence to foreign policy and national security. The American Enterprise Institute may be its intellectual nerve center, but it is strongly represented in such think tanks as the Heritage Foundation, the Ethics and Public Policy Center, the Hoover Institution, and the Claremont Institute. On television, the Fox News Network pushes the neo-Jacobin foreign policy line most conspicuously and reliably. Its owner, Rupert Murdoch, is also the financier of the *Weekly Standard*. The same foreign policy agenda flourishes on all the television networks and major cable channels. On the radio and elsewhere neo-Jacobinism has acquired millions of flag-waving supporters by portraying itself as kick-butt American patriotism.

Besides President Bush, a large number of politicians have made the ideology of empire their own. Vice President Richard Cheney has been particularly close to the neo-Jacobin network of political activists and intellectuals and especially effective in promoting its objectives in government. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has long been cultivated by its members. In the case of these businessmen-politicians, the fondness for neo-Jacobin thinking seems to be grounded less in intellectual considerations than in a belief that the ideology serves their own reasons for wanting American global supremacy.

Those who have been most active promoting the ideas and practical implementation of neo-Jacobin ideology are often called "neoconservatives." This strangely inapt designation will be discussed later. The names of the more prominent neoconservatives are becoming familiar. They include William Bennett, Midge Decter, Douglas Feith, David Frum, Frank

Gaffney, Robert Kagan, Charles Krauthammer, Irving and William Kristol, Michael Ledeen, Lewis "Scooter" Libby, Joshua Muravchik, Michael Novak, Richard Perle, Norman Podhoretz, and Paul Wolfowitz.

Though the new Jacobinism has been most visibly championed in recent years by a Republican president, the ideology is strongly represented also in the Democratic Party. A number of the just-mentioned individuals used to be or remain attached to the Democratic Party. Several worked for such Democratic politicians as Senators Henry "Scoop" Jackson, Hubert Humphrey, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and vice-presidential candidate Sargent Shriver. A Democrat who is currently particularly well liked by them and belongs to their network is Senator Joseph Lieberman, the former vice-presidential candidate. Many of the critics of the Bush administration's foreign policy in the Democratic Party actually subscribe themselves to Wilsonian assumptions of American moral superiority and benevolence and oppose only the confrontational and militaristic methods of the Bush administration.²⁶

This is a good time to suggest that, although people who are commonly called neoconservatives are far from intellectually uniform and include some with genuinely conservative leanings, neoconservatism is in its main thrust a special, ideologically intense form of modern progressive liberalism. Especially in its foreign policy views, neoconservatism is hard to distinguish from neo-Jacobinism. It differs from some other forms of liberalism in that, at least for public consumption, it affirms universal principles and wants a single model of society, "democracy," to be spread around the world through the assertive use of American might. By contrast, a traditionally conservative concern for higher values has little or nothing to do with belief in a universal political and social model. The sense of right, conservatism contends, must emerge in and be adapted to the special circumstances of time and place, just as in ennobling its own ways a particular society must consider and build on the best of its own history.²⁷ Neoconservatives typically see history as an obstacle to the implementation of the right model.

The neoconservatives who form the core of the neo-Jacobin movement have followed no single path to their hard-line, universalistic liberalism. Some of them were once believers in Leon Trotsky's theories of global revolution and continue to see a need for overturning traditional societies

26. For example, one of the grand old men of the Democratic Party, Walter Mondale, is critical of the belligerence and unilateralism of the Bush administration but favorable to a Wilsonian-style American exceptionalism. See Walter Mondale, *American Exceptionalism, Global Security, and Human Dignity: The Great Challenge of the 21st Century*, 3 U. St. Thomas L.J. 169 (2006).

27. For a classical example of this conservative attitude, see Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* 76 (J.G.A. Pocock ed., Hackett Publ. Co. 1987). For a brief summary of elements of conservative thought, see Robert Nisbet, *Conservatism: Dream and Reality* (U. of Minn. 1986).

around the world. Some admired the democratic socialism of Sidney Hook and retain a belief in strong, progressive, activist government. Some were influenced by Leo Strauss and derive from him an antihistorical and universalistic political theory. Some received impulses from all three as well as other sources. Those who were Marxists have had "second thoughts" and accepted capitalism in some form, but, whatever their individual intellectual starting points, they were strongly drawn from the beginning to the idea that achieving the good society requires the dismantling of historically evolved societies and setting them on the path to progress. Today they believe that all nations should be organized according to the ahistorical, allegedly universal principles of the United States.

The pattern of thought and imagination that is here labeled "the new Jacobinism" is of course more or less pronounced in particular persons. If many so-called neoconservatives are among the most ardent advocates of neo-Jacobinism, it is also true that neoconservatives disagree among themselves on particular issues and that the label "neoconservative" can be as misleading as any other label when applied to individuals. It should be added that not all who have contributed to the neo-Jacobin mindset or are strongly drawn to it, be they called neoconservatives or anything else, need be comfortable with it in all respects.

The Discrediting of Historically Formed Societies

This writer has for many years pointed to the intellectual connection between American neo-Jacobinism and the ideas of Leo Strauss, the German-American political theorist at the University of Chicago, who died in 1973.²⁸ When Strauss's influence on neoconservatism finally began to attract some public attention in connection with the campaign for war against Iraq, most of the interest focused on the fact that Strauss and the Straussians have generated a cliquish sense of philosophical superiority and have advocated the use of political deceit, advice said to have been put to use in the effort to push the United States into war.²⁹ The Straussians have long cultivated a belief that only they possess genuine insight, meaning, among other things, that they see right through widely but uncritically held conventional beliefs. Their philosophical insights are, they assume, wholly beyond the grasp of ordinary people and would be disturbing to them. Intellectuals, too, who are not fully initiated members of the Straussian circle are thought to be unable to understand what the Straussians understand. Because their in-

28. See Claes G. Ryn, *The New Jacobinism: Can Democracy Survive?* (The Natl. Humanities Inst. 1991) (a small monograph whose argument is much more fully developed in Ryn, *supra* n. 2); Claes G. Ryn, *The Democracy Boosters*, 41 National Review 30 (1989)).

29. For a study of the cliquishness, ideas, and *modus operandi* of the Straussians, see Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (Yale U. Press 2004). For an examination of the philosophical basis of the conspiratorial element of Straussianism, see Claes G. Ryn, *Leo Strauss and History: The Philosopher as Conspirator*, 18 Humanitas (2005).

sights pose a threat to the established order, the insightful must feign holding opinions less offensive to inherited beliefs. They must use deceit to insert themselves into the counsels of the powerful. Once there, they can advance their own objectives by whispering in the ear of the rulers. This mindset does throw light on the conduct of key proponents of the war in Iraq and of American global supremacy, but in the context of the present argument, which concerns the neo-Jacobin justification for unlimited power, another aspect of Strauss's thought merits closer attention.

Because Strauss spoke in the name of what he called "ancient" or "classical" political philosophy and seemed to favor the rule of a wise elite over the *hoi polloi*, many assumed that he was some kind of conservative, an assumption that is not entirely without foundation but that neglects too much else in his work. The part of Strauss's thinking that is particularly relevant to understanding neo-Jacobin ideology is its emphatically *anti*-conservative aspect, how it subverts loyalty to the "ancestral" and traditions of all sorts. To respect anything because it is old is, Strauss asserts, to abjure philosophy. To stress the historical nature of human existence and the importance of heeding historical experience is to be a "historicist" and to foster value relativism or nihilism. The true philosopher is not interested in historical particularity but in universality.³⁰

Because of Strauss's apparent defense of universal right, his attack on "historicism" has been interpreted by philosophically unsuspecting and less than well-educated readers as a defense of "traditional values." His thinking actually creates a deep prejudice against taking tradition seriously. It discredits the conservative habit of looking to long-established human practices and beliefs for guides to life's higher values.

Strauss sharply criticizes Edmund Burke (1729–1797), the English Whig statesman and political writer, the impassioned adversary of the French Revolution. Burke defends what he calls "the general bank and capital of nations and of ages," that is, the ancient and slowly accumulating insights of humanity.³¹ Burke defends this heritage not as a definitive, ultimate standard of good but as a necessary support for intellectually and morally frail human beings, who without the evolved beliefs of the human race would have to fall back on nothing more than the meager resources of individuals. The latter are, Burke argues, wholly insufficient for a satisfactory life. The individual tends to be foolish but the species wise. Precisely because rationalists will not learn the lessons from the concrete historical ex-

30. Strauss's critique of historicism as incompatible with philosophy is found in Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (U. of Chi. Press 1953) (see especially the Introduction and Chapters 1 and 4); see also Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* 19 J. Politics 355 (1957). For an analysis and critique of Strauss's antihistoricism, see Ryn, *supra* n. 29. For a critique of Strauss's interpretation of Burke and an alternative view of Burke, see Joseph Baldacchino, *The Value-Centered Historicism of Edmund Burke*, 27 *Modern Age* (No. 2, 1983) (available at <http://www.nhinet.org/burke.htm>).

31. Burke, *supra* n. 27, at 76.

perience of humanity, they are unaware of the limits of human ratiocination.³²

For Strauss, "the ancestral" deserves no deference. It is not the product of reflection but of historical accident. To philosophize, Strauss asserts, means "to transcend all human traditions."³³ Only the philosopher's insight into ahistorical natural right is worthy of respect. History as such has nothing to contribute to enlightenment. It is, as Plato believed, a mere flux devoid of meaning. Strauss chastises Burke for not believing that the best political regime is formed according to a universal model—what Strauss calls the "simply right"—as discerned by an outstandingly wise person, a philosophical "lawgiver." Instead Burke believes that a good society can emerge only historically, over time, by building on the best from its own past. Strauss dismisses this view as "historicism," as neglecting what is intrinsically right. "Historicism," he asserts, "rejects the question of the good society, that is to say, of *the* good society. . . ."³⁴

Strauss is correct that Burke does not accept the notion of a single model of political right, but Strauss is wholly mistaken in assuming that Burke is *ipso facto* undermining or abandoning the notion of moral universality. Burke emphatically affirms it. What he does reject is the belief that moral-political right can be summed up once and for all in a particular formula. Such an idea is, he believes, both superficial and arrogant and hides a desire to dominate others. All societies should aspire to moral and other good, but they must realize higher values differently according to their particular historical circumstances, and they need the guidance and support of what is best in their own traditions.

Strauss, in contrast, presents tradition and universality as inherently opposed to each other. It is necessary to choose between them. "The recognition of universal principles . . . tends to prevent men from wholeheartedly identifying themselves with, or accepting, the social order that fate has allotted to them. It tends to *alienate* them from their place on the earth."³⁵ Universal principles, then, are by their very nature dangerous to particular traditions. Hence a person standing, for example, in the Christian tradition must, if he is to respect philosophy, loosen or give up his attachment to that

32. A large and expanding scholarly literature examines Burke's views on these matters. See e.g. Peter J. Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (U. Mich. Press 1958); Francis P. Canavan, *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke* (Duke U. Press 1960); Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* ch. 2 (7th rev. ed., Regnery Books 1986).

33. Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* *supra* n. 30, at 360. For Strauss's criticisms of Burke, see the section on Burke in the chapter entitled "The Crisis of Modern Natural Right" in Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, *supra* n. 30, at 294.

34. Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy*, *supra* n. 30, at 355.

35. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, *supra* n. 30, at 13–14 (emphasis added). For a critique of antihistoricism and an argument for the potential synthesis of historical particularity and universality, see Claes G. Ryn, *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World* (U. Mo. Press 2003).

heritage. That so many Christian intellectuals, not least Roman Catholics, have incorporated Straussian antihistoricism into their thinking is indicative of philosophical poverty as well as gullibility, not to say suicidal tendencies. They do not realize that to accept the Straussian ahistorical notions of philosophy and right is to accept the belief that synthesis between the universal and the historical is impossible. But to do so is, among other things, to reject the Christian idea of incarnation, the possibility of the “word” becoming “flesh.” Only a lack of philosophical sophistication could explain the ease with which so many Christians have been persuaded to adopt a doctrine that strikes against the heart of their own professed beliefs. Equally indicative of philosophical paucity and confusion has been the readiness of self-described intellectual conservatives to turn against the kind of historical sense and appreciation for the guidance of history that helps define modern conservatism.

Though Strauss does not quite say it outright, his thinking delegitimizes traditional beliefs, institutions, and elites—secular as well as clerical—and justifies the ascent to power of a new elite that does respect universal right or, at least, does not pay any heed to tradition.

What is anticonservative about Strauss’s philosophy is not that he affirms universality or that he believes that philosophers do in a sense transcend particular traditions. It is that he conceives of universality in a radically ahistorical way and regards natural right as inherently inimical to tradition. It is here that Straussianism links up with Jacobinism. Some interpreters of Strauss, including some of his admirers, argue that his apparent endorsement of universality, specifically, of “natural right,” is mere opportunistic rhetoric and that he is, in the end, a moral nihilist. This issue cannot be explored here. Suffice it to say that Strauss may, in fact, not have a single, unambiguous view of universality.³⁶ Be that as it may, he and his followers have contributed to the neo-Jacobin lack of interest in or disdain for the historically evolved circumstances of particular societies. They have also helped generate the neo-Jacobin idea that there exists a single, morally mandatory form of society, what Strauss calls a “universal and unchangeable norm.”³⁷ To make these observations and to point out that admirers of Strauss are spread throughout the Bush administration is, of course, not to have settled the precise extent to which Strauss himself would have supported the global democratic revolution as currently conceived.

According to Strauss, “the acceptance of any universal or abstract principles has necessarily a revolutionary, disturbing, unsettling effect.”³⁸ The neo-Jacobin propensity of many so-called neoconservatives is evident from

36. For an examination of Strauss’s ambiguity on the issue of universality, see Claes G. Ryn, *History and the Moral Order*, in *The Ethical Dimension of Political Life: Essays in Honor of John H. Hallowell* (Francis Canavan ed., Duke U. Press 1983) and Ryn, *supra* n. 29.

37. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, *supra* n. 30, at 13.

38. *Id.*

their regarding universal principles as having the same effect in politics as Strauss sees universal principles as having in philosophy. The desire of many neoconservatives to clear the decks of historically evolved beliefs and institutions extends to America itself. The America they champion is not the actual, historical America with its deep roots in Christian and English civilization. Their America is a country of their own theoretical invention. It does not owe its greatness and distinctiveness to old Western traditions but to its rational, ahistorical founding principles. This America represents a radical break with history.

Despite the label unthinkingly applied to them, most of the neoconservatives think of themselves as representing a progressive, even revolutionary force. According to professor Harry Jaffa, another leading disciple of Leo Strauss, "To celebrate the American Founding is . . . to celebrate revolution." The American Revolution on behalf of freedom may appear mild "as compared with subsequent revolutions in France, Russia, China, Cuba, or elsewhere," Jaffa notes, but "it nonetheless embodied the greatest attempt at innovation that human history has recorded."³⁹ America is defined by how it differs from the past. What is innovative is the *idea* of America. For Irving Kristol, the reputed "godfather" of neoconservatism, who claims to be an admirer of Strauss, the United States is defined by the principles to which it is committed. It is "ideological, like the Soviet Union of yesteryear."⁴⁰

Straussians are fond of referring to "the Founding" of the United States, because that term suggests that America sprang from a fresh start. America adopted ahistorical universal principles, turning its back on the bad old ways of Europe. The Straussian use of the term "founding" conceals that prior to the War of Independence, which Straussians prefer to call "the American Revolution," and prior to the framing of the Constitution, America was already constituted as functioning societies along the lines of classical, Christian, and specifically English traditions. In particular, the term "American Revolution" conceals the great extent to which America after the War of Independence, including the U.S. Constitution, was a continuation of that heritage.⁴¹

Many neoconservatives have long tried to transfer American patriotism to a redefined, Jacobin-style America, seen as representing a break with

39. Harry V. Jaffa, *Equality as a Conservative Principle*, in *Keeping the Tablets: Modern American Conservative Thought* (William F. Buckley, Jr. & Charles R. Kesler eds., rev. ed., Harper & Row 1988). The attempt by Jaffa, his fellow-Straussian Allan Bloom, and others to define American principles as a radical departure from the past is discussed at length in Ryn, *supra* n. 2, especially ch. 12.

40. Irving Kristol, *The Neo-Conservative Persuasion: What it was, and what it is*, 8 *The Weekly Standard* 10 (Aug. 25, 2003) (available at <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/003/000tzmlw.asp>).

41. For a discussion of the continuity of America's "founding" with its past, including British tradition, see Ryn, *supra* n. 2, especially chs. 5 & 12.

the past. Irving Kristol's son William, for example, has long stressed America's universalist mission and insisted that America must have great military and other governmental might vigorously to promote its principles in the world. The old American suspicion of strong, centralized, activist federal government must be abandoned, he has argued.⁴² So confident have the neoconservatives become of their hold on power that some of them no longer bother to hide the difference between their conception of American government and that of traditional American conservatives. According to Kristol senior, it has been the historical role of neoconservatism "to convert the Republican party, and American conservatism in general, against their respective wills," to the new, far more ambitious conception of government.⁴³

Another leading neoconservative, Michael Ledeen, who was an advisor on international relations and national security in the Reagan White House, openly portrays the America with which he identifies as a destroyer of existing societies. According to Ledeen, "Creative destruction is our middle name, both within our society and abroad. We tear down the old order every day. . . . Our enemies have always hated this whirlwind of energy and creativity, which menaces their traditions [We] must destroy them to advance our historic mission."⁴⁴ Ledeen argues that change, and not least violent change, is the essence of human history.

Some of the most prominent neoconservatives were once Marxists, but even after becoming more favorable to capitalism they have retained a deep desire to remake the world. One of the reasons why the new Jacobins are fond of capitalism is that, like Marx, they regard it as an effective destroyer of traditional culture.⁴⁵

It should be obvious by now that calling people who are attracted to the new Jacobinism "neoconservatives" reveals great confusion. Modern conservatism was born in opposition to Jacobin universalism. The liberalism of the father of conservatism, Edmund Burke, a Whig, was wholly different from that of today's Jacobin liberalism. Burke was friendly to the American colonists, supporting them against the British government. He fought energetically, at great political risk to himself, for conciliation with the colonies. He thought the Americans were on strong traditional grounds challenging King and Parliament.⁴⁶ Burke had a completely different view

42. See e.g. William Kristol & David Brooks, *What Ails Conservatism*, Wall St. J. 22 (Sept. 15, 1997).

43. Kristol, *supra* n. 40.

44. Michael A. Ledeen, *The War Against the Terror Masters: Why It Happened. Where We Are Now. Why We'll Win*. 212–13 (Truman Talley Books 2002).

45. For a discussion of how fondness for capitalism is sometimes related to a desire to eradicate inherited culture, see Ryn, *supra* n. 2, at ch. 14 (entitled "Jacobin Capitalism").

46. For an account of Burke's actions in support of the American colonists and the closeness of his views to those of the Americans, see Russell Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered* (rev. updated ed., Intercollegiate Stud. Inst. 1997).

of the French Revolution and Jacobin thinking. He saw those ideas as expressing an unhistorical, tyrannical spirit and an importunate desire for power. Burke warned specifically against the Jacobin idea of "liberty," which he found a dangerous abstraction.⁴⁷ Like Burke, the Framers of the U.S. Constitution associated liberty with particular inherited traditions, limited, decentralized government, checks on power, self-restraint, moderation, good manners, modesty, and a willingness to compromise. Jacobin "freedom" justifies unchecked power.

American Constitutionalism vs. the Will to Dominate

The Framers' conception of freedom was indistinguishable from an essentially Christian view of human nature and society, though it was also influenced by other ideas, including ones drawn from the Scottish Enlightenment. The Framers saw human nature as having both higher and lower potentialities and were acutely aware of the moral preconditions of responsible freedom. Original sin always threatened to infect human action. The Framers feared the self-indulgent ego in themselves and others. They stressed the need to check the darker potentialities of human nature, the unleashing of which could wreak havoc on the individual and society. They hoped that in personal life moral character would restrain the desire for self-aggrandizement, just as in national political life the checks and balances of the U.S. Constitution would contain and domesticate the all-too-human desire for power. Personal self-control and constitutionalism were but different aspects of the effort to subdue the voracious ego. An irresponsible, egotistical pursuit of power would destroy freedom, including constitutionalism. The greater the capacity for self-restraint, the greater the capacity for freedom. Freedom was for the Framers not, as for Rousseau and the old and new Jacobins, a free gift of nature, something that would simply flow once freedom had been declared and restrictions to it had been removed. Real freedom cannot be bestowed on a people. It must be achieved by the particular people by fulfilling the preconditions of freedom, which involves protracted inner and outer struggle. This effort must take into account the historical circumstances of time and place. The freedom the Framers treasured had been made possible by the classical, Christian, and English traditions. It could be safeguarded only by the continuation of the moral and cultural life that had fostered freedom in the first place. The War of Independence had been fought by the American colonists in large part to reclaim traditional rights and liberties of Englishmen that had been violated by King and Parliament. Despite the rhetoric used by some Americans to justify separation from Britain, freedom was for the Framers not, as for the

47. See Burke, *supra* n. 27, at 7-8.

French Jacobins, a self-subsisting, ahistorical, “natural” right, but something accomplished by a people accustomed to acting responsibly.⁴⁸

The thinking behind “the global democratic revolution” represents a radical departure from this thinking. It should be pointed out, first of all, that the Framers did not consider themselves democrats. “Democracy” or “pure democracy” was for them something to be avoided.⁴⁹ The term had for them negative connotations, calling to mind rabble-rousing, opportunism, irresponsibility, demagoguery, short-sightedness, and other ignoble qualities incompatible with good government. The regime they wanted would rest on popular consent but would have quasi-aristocratic features, which protected decision makers to a considerable extent from popular pressure. The will of the American people would not be determined by the numerical majority of the population but through representative, deliberative institutions and sturdy checks on the political passions of the moment. No human beings and especially not the popular majority of the moment could be trusted with unlimited power.

Traditional American political thought and the new Jacobinism diverge sharply with regard to the view of power. Traditional Americans feared concentrations of power, whether in the hands of rulers or the masses. John Adams reflected this earlier American ethos when he said that the people can be as tyrannical as any king. Human nature being what it is, no individual or government is above suspicion. Virtue is highly desirable, even essential, but its influence in politics and elsewhere will always be limited.

Neo-Jacobin ideology asserts the existence of a political will that rises above human failings. This is a will that desires the well-being of all mankind and that defines a great moral cause. Because it is inherently virtuous, this will should prevail. Indeed, to oppose it would be evil. The neo-Jacobins see America as the political embodiment of this noble will and have appointed this country as the moral arbiter for the world. As America is virtuous, it need not be encumbered by restraints on its international conduct. Neo-Jacobin ideology authorizes greater American military and other might and the removal of obstacles to the triumph of the American cause. This ideology can, as has been suggested, be interpreted as an attempt to justify, boost, and unleash American power. Among the obstacles to American power are the beliefs, institutions, and elites of various countries that

48. The points made in this paragraph are more fully argued and substantiated in Ryn, *supra* n. 2, and Ryn, *Democracy and the Ethical Life*, *supra* n. 14. Regarding the British origins of the American constitutional order, see Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Constitution* (Regnery Gateway 1990) and Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (4th ed., Intercollegiate Stud. Inst. 2004); see also Willmoore Kendall & George W. Carey, *The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition* (repr. ed., Catholic U. of Am. Press 1995).

49. See e.g. James Madison, *The Federalist No. 10*, in Alexander Hamilton, James Madison & John Jay, *The Federalist* 46–48 (George W. Carey & James McClellan eds., Kendall/Hunt 1990).

resist American dominance, and the ideology shows them to be incompatible with the universal principles of mankind. Neo-Jacobinism makes the case for sweeping away such clutter.

The old Americans did not try to extinguish the will to power. This is not even a desirable goal. Nothing good could be accomplished without somebody asserting power and overcoming obstacles. But the old Americans saw great danger in the will to power breaking free of moral and political checks and being diverted from legitimate ends. The Framers assumed that for the Constitution to work its institutions had to be manned by individuals who embodied its spirit. These individuals had to be predisposed to virtues like self-control, respect for law, and a willingness to listen to others. They had to have what this writer likes to call the constitutional personality. The spirit of the written Constitution stemmed from America's unwritten constitution, from the religious, moral, and cultural life that had inclined Americans to constitutionalism in the first place. The Constitution could not survive without character traits that the Framers hoped would be widespread.⁵⁰ All know Benjamin Franklin's answer to the woman who asked what the Constitutional Convention had produced: "A republic, if you can keep it." The primary reason why the U.S. Constitution has become a shadow of its former self is that it cannot be sustained without the constitutional personality. It can be argued that an increasingly grasping, "imperialistic" ego is throwing off the old American constitutional self and corresponding constitutional restraints.

A desire for self-aggrandizement that is hard to reconcile with the original constitutional temperament has long been at work in American politics. It has transformed limited, decentralized American government into a national Superstate, which has given political power a scope far beyond the worst fears of the anti-Federalists. The Tenth Amendment, that supposedly ironclad guarantee against unintended expansion of central power, is a dead letter, like so much else in the Constitution. Decision makers in Washington reach into virtually every aspect of American life. Today the neo-Jacobins aspire to power on an even broader, indeed, unexampled scale. They want global supremacy.

As we have seen, the will to dominate does not present itself as such; it typically wraps itself in phrases of selflessness and benevolence. It discovers ever-new reasons for government to do good. The greater the caring for others, the greater the need to place power in the hands of those who care. Is it sheer coincidence that the benevolence empowers the benevolent? So well does the will to dominate dress itself up in moralistic attire that it almost deceives the power seekers themselves. The stated goal of the

50. On the relationship between the written Constitution and the unwritten one, including the constitutional personality, see Claes G. Ryn, *Political Philosophy and The Unwritten Constitution*, 34 Modern Age (Nov. 4, 1992) (available at <http://www.nhinet.org/unwrit.htm>).

French Jacobins, “freedom, equality and brotherhood,” could not be achieved by merely reforming historically evolved ways of life; it required the radical remaking of society. Because of the scope and glory of the task, the Jacobins felt entitled to gathering great power unto themselves. Because opponents of their noble cause were obviously evil, the Jacobins could deal ruthlessly with opposition. In the twentieth century, the communist goal of a total transformation of society provided a rationale for unlimited power.

Aside from other functions that political ideas may have, they can be a stimulant for or a check on the will to power. Neo-Jacobinism is a prime example of the former. The old American idea of limited, decentralized government appealed to individuals convinced that placing restrictions on self was essential to human well-being. Today, an increasingly common human type is strongly drawn to grandiose political objectives and to a correspondingly grandiose moral justification. Two prominent neoconservatives, David Frum and Richard Perle, who are enthusiastic advocates of American global supremacy, summarized the moral purpose of this reign in the title of their coauthored book *An End to Evil*.⁵¹ Could any goal be more appealing to the will to power? The task of ridding the world of evil is at once enormous and endless and requires power to match. And who but morally perverse individuals could oppose power wielded in such a cause?

It should be evident that such a pursuit and justification of power runs counter to the old American political tradition. Representatives of the latter would have rejected out of hand as naïve and utopian the notion that evil could be “ended.” From the traditional point of view, Rousseau’s idea of the fundamental goodness of man and his vision of society gloriously transformed must seem a figment of a childish imagination. Evil can be limited and tamed to some extent—that the Framers of the Constitution did believe—but evil remains a chronic feature of human affairs.

It is partly to break free of the old fear of unlimited power and the view of life that it implies that the new Jacobins have tried to transfer the allegiance of Americans to a reinvented America. They have propounded a new myth—the myth of America the Virtuous—according to which America is called to remake the world in its own image and according to which it should have a free rein. The myth provides the appetite for power with the moral cover that it likes to have. It is unclear whether individuals like Perle and Frum actually believe in the possibility of ending evil. They may, like some other neoconservatives, be engaged in a cynical effort to build support for their own political objectives among Americans whose imaginations have become susceptible to utopian and moralistic appeals.

Do the new Jacobins find it a remarkable coincidence that they should be living at the precise moment in history when mankind finally discovered the one valid political model and that they should also happen to be living

51. As a speechwriter for President Bush, Frum had coined the phrase “the axis of evil.”

in the country that embodies that model and is called to bestow it on the rest of the world? Such questions, which would trouble philosophers, do not bother neo-Jacobin ideologues who are arguing towards a preconceived conclusion, which is that they should preside over an American global empire.

The neo-Jacobins like to point out that we live in a dangerous world full of odious political regimes, that terrorism poses a serious threat to America and its allies, and that America must, as the world's only superpower, play a leading role in the world. But these considerations do not by themselves validate their plans for American global supremacy. All realistic observers agree that the world is full of dangers; it always was. It is no less obvious that, like other countries, the United States must be prepared to defend itself and its legitimate interests. And who would deny that, as a superpower, it will have to carry a heavier responsibility than other countries for international order? It does not follow that America must impose its will on the rest of humanity and remake the world. To defend that proposition the new Jacobins have recourse to their ideology.

Conclusion

Often the new Jacobins try to justify American global dominance by claiming that 9/11 changed everything. Yet the basic terms of human existence did not change. Not even terrible world events cancel the need for those personal qualities and social and political structures without which power threatens to become arbitrary and tyrannical. Because 9/11 required a firm response of some kind, it was not as clear as it might have been that for those who harbored the imperialistic drive the atrocity became a welcome excuse to throw off restraints. Americans in general being not yet willing to accept a forthright, undisguised grasp for power, neo-Jacobin ideology provided moral authorization for a supremacist foreign policy.

The argument presented here does not imply that ideas and visions need be mere rationalizations for already existing desires. Often reason and imagination are directive, formative forces that generate new desire and conduct. Yet some ideas do not appeal as much to the will to power as do others. The old Western notion of human moral and intellectual imperfection went hand in hand with recognition of a need for self-control and humility. This view of human nature and the political attitudes that it fostered tended to *forestall* or *defuse* an inordinate desire for power, hence was not pleasing to the ego that wants to dominate other human beings. The belief that humanity is flawed was an integral part of the constitutionalist temperament, which can be traced all the way back to Aristotle, not to speak of the Old Testament.

The ideology of neo-Jacobinism, by contrast, offers a potent stimulant to the will to power. It can be seen as authorizing a desire for unobstructed

global dominance. The desire to have the United States flex its muscles and govern the world is frequently on display among the neoconservatives and their allies. Charles Krauthammer, for instance, a prominent columnist and media commentator, keeps telling his countrymen that America is no “mere international citizen.” It is “the dominant power in the world, more dominant than any since Rome.” It should be using its power to create a world more to its liking. It should “reshape norms, alter expectations and create new realities. How? By unapologetic and implacable demonstrations of will.”⁵² The argument presented here has shown why the new Jacobins feel no need to apologize for their assertiveness. Why, given America’s noble cause, should their exercise of power not be “implacable”? Robert Kagan, another well-known foreign policy commentator, similarly wants America to use its power in a more forceful, confrontational manner. “America, with its vast power, can sometimes seem like a bully on the world stage,” he wrote in 2002. “But, really, the 1,200-pound gorilla is an underachiever in the bullying business.”⁵³

The ideology of American empire, notably its notion of unilateralism, marks a sharp departure from the old American spirit of constitutionalism and checks and balances. The U.S. Framers assumed not only the need for restraints on power but for particular interests to accommodate each other. As applied to international affairs, such thinking means that states should check and balance and try to accommodate each other. The notion that America knows better than all other nations and has a right to dictate terms to them betrays an attitude alien to traditional American constitutionalism. The great difference between neo-Jacobin supremacist thinking and the ethos of an earlier constitutionalist America is suggested by a comment made by Alexander Hamilton in 1797 about the French government. Hamilton found its Jacobin-flavored desire to dictate to other nations unacceptable. He wrote about France that it

betrayed a spirit of universal domination; an opinion that she had a right to be the legislatrix of nations; that they are all bound to submit to her mandates, to take from her their moral, political, and religious creeds; that her plastic and regenerating hand is to mould them into whatever shape she thinks fit; and that her interest is to be the sole measure of the rights of the rest of the world.

Hamilton’s condemnation of the presumed right of France to dictate how other nations should behave can be read as a condemnation of those who make the same claims for America today. Such claims, Hamilton argued, are repugnant “to the general rights of nations, to the true principles of liberty, [and] to the freedom of opinion of mankind.”⁵⁴ The constitution-

52. Charles Krauthammer, *The Bush Doctrine*, 157 *Time Mag.* 42 (Mar. 5, 2001).

53. Robert Kagan, *France’s Dream World*, *Wash. Post B07* (Nov. 3, 2002).

54. *The Anglo-American Tradition in Foreign Affairs: Readings from Thomas More to Woodrow Wilson* 139, 144 (Arnold Wolfers & Laurence W. Martin eds., Yale U. Press 1956)

alist temperament of America was and remains incompatible with the Jacobin spirit.

For Christians, the cardinal sin is pride. Before them, the Greeks warned of the great danger of conceit and arrogance. Hubris, they said, violates the order of the cosmos, and inflicts great suffering on human beings. It invites Nemesis. On the Apollonian temple at Delphi two inscriptions summed up the proper attitude to life. One was "Everything in moderation," the other "Know Thyself." To know yourself meant most importantly to recognize that you are not one of the gods but a mere mortal. In the Old Testament, we read in Proverbs: "Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord." (16:5) "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall." (16:18) "The Lord will destroy the house of the proud." (15:25)

To the new Jacobins, such warnings and calls for humility have the quaint sound of something long outdated. Why should those who know how humanity should live question their own ideas or right to dominate? The world needs "moral clarity," not obfuscation. Many of those who shape the destiny of America and the world today are just such "terrible simplifiers" with absurdly swollen egos. How very different the personality that defined the old America and conceived the Constitution! In 1789, George Washington proclaimed a day of thanksgiving for all the good bestowed by Almighty God on the American people. He asked his fellow Americans to unite "in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the Great Lord and Ruler of nations and beseech Him to pardon our national and other transgressions." This is the voice of an America that may be passing.

(quoting Alexander Hamilton, *The Warning*, and Alexander Hamilton, *Pacificus*, in *The Works of Alexander Hamilton* (Henry Cabot Lodge ed., G.P. Putnam's Sons 1885-1886)). I am indebted to David C. Hendrickson for drawing my attention to these comments.